Devil's brew brought sweet relief to dusty land

The population of San Diego began to swell at the turn of the century but the city fathers were afraid it wouldn't last if the persistent drought didn't end.

The engineers decided to build the Morena Dam 60 miles to the east in the mountains near the Mexican border. The location was excellent, at the head of a small stream-fed lake between canyon walls.

As work progressed, the drought continued and the nearby lake shrank. When the dam was completed two years later, the lake had shrivelled to a damp marshland.

In 1912 with the residents in the parched area almost in panic, the San Diego Wide Wake Improvement Club broached the idea of hiring a rainmaker. The city council scoffed at the suggestion: Why not save money and hire a band of Apache medicine men?"

The art of pluviculture in those days was quite respectable, except for the Weather Bureau in Washington which conducted a vigorous campaign against all such chicanery, After all, when rainmaker Edward Powers insisted rain could be made to fall by concussion, he almost persuaded a red-faced Congress to authorize a battery of cannons to pulverize the clouds.

By Raymond Schuessler
DeLand, Florida

The Wide Awake Club insisted that their man, Charles Mallory Hatfield, the most successful rainmaker of his time, had a provable reputation for precipitation citing a number of rainmaking incidents:

Near Vista, Calif., where the Hatfields had settled (father and brother Paul), they had built a 20-footplatform on their farm with a windmill on it into which they fermented chemicals on a bright and sunny day. Soon it began to rain-the only place it rained in California that day.

Luck? On another cloudless day they tossed even more witch's brew into the windmill and Vista received over one-half inch of rain without a drop falling elsewhere.

One thousand dollars was offered by the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce if Hatfield could bring rain to their city.

The cheerful former sewing machine salesman built his magic tower near Baldwin Hills and sprayed the concoction into the atmosphere for four months. While San Diego didn't get a smidgen of rain, 18 inches fell on Los Angeles!

In between his phenomenal successes, he took to the lecture circuit to discourse on "How to Attract Moisture-Laden Atmosphere." Admirers had attached a Professor" to his name even though Hatfield left school suddenly after the ninth grade. So cocky did he become that he spoke now of watering the Sahara and dispelling London's fog.

But detractors said he was acutely aware of rain cycles in every area he worked and planned his campaigns just before showers were historically patterned to occur

To his detractors Hatfield proclaimed, "From the Copernican theory every important discovery has been met with derision and ridicule." In the meantime, his "Hatfield Umbrellas" were selling quite well.

Tourists began to complain about the constant deluge, and the Hatfields were asked by the city to back off and shut down. Payment of $1,000 was made.

(Weather Bureau records indicated that for the 28 years from 1877 to 1904 more than 18 inches fell in exactly half the time Hatfield had mentioned. He had made an even call 50-50!)

In 1905, after a drought of six months, the South Yuba Water Company in California offered Hatfield $250 to break the drought with $100 extra for every inch up to five inches. Again, Hatfield succeeded.

When Hatfield went to the Yukon to help bring rain for the local hydraulic mining, the Canadian House of Commons debated the issue. One member feared he might tinker with Providence and carelessly flood the entire continent. But he was hired. For 44 days he petitioned the heavens for rain, some fell over 36 days but not enough to get the mines going. He did get paid.

Shortly after Hatfield filled a lake in Stanislaus County, Calif., and a reservoir in Fresno. The Denver Posteulogized Hatfield's mystical powers in 1915 with a full-page spread.

Still San Diego balked. "Lucky," they maintained. "He follows weather reports from nearby areas." But San Diego was blowing away in the wind.

Hatfield made a generous offer to the dessicant town in December 8, 1915, offering to produce 40 inches of rain near Morena Dam at no expense.

The council agreed. The next day Hatfield showed up with an adriot contract:

"I will till the Morean Reservoir to overflowing between now and next December 20, 1916, for the sum of $10,000, in default of which I ask no compensation. Or I will deliver at Morean Reservoir 30 inches of rain at no charge, you to pay me $500 per inch from the 13 inch to the 15 inch-all above 50 inches to be tree, on or before the first of June, 1916. Or I will discharge 40 inches during the next 12 months, free of charge, provided you pay me $1,000 per inch for all between 40 and 50 inches, all above inches free."

The council chose the flat fee of $10,000 to fill the reservoir but proffered no contract.

The Hatfields proceeded to build their platform near the Morena Dam. No windmill was used this time. They set up their fire and proceeded to cook the chemicals on Friday, January 13, 1917.

Early the next morning a heavy overcast enveloped the area and by noon a heavy downpour began to fill the rivers. Newly built Agua Caliente Racetrack had to call off the races.

Three days later the rain was still coming down in buckets. lbwns began to panic. Who was this demon, Hatiield? Was he in cahoots with the Devil? The swollen rivers began to wash away bridges. Trains had to stop running and roads were under water. Part of the Agua Caliente racetrack had washed away.

Still Hatfield's inferno kept belching noxious chemicals into the air. Crews worked day and night to keep the concoction going in face of the heavy deluge. "Once you got the rains coming, you had to keep feeding the juice." Hatfield explained.

lb make sure the San Diego Council knew what was going on Hatfield called to confirm his elixir was to blame. "The dam now has 12.75 inches of water. But don't worry (while roads, bridges, crops, cars, raiboads and people were being washed away) this is only a light shower. In a couple days, it really is going to rain."

On January 20 it was still raining. A few miles north of San Diego, a stranded Santa Fe passenger train was being relieved of its passengers by an ocean launch. Houses and bodies were floating out of Tijuana.

The San Diego Council in an attempt to halt this madman, tired to phone Hatfield but the lines had been washed out. A posse was sent to find Hatfield at the Morean Dam.

They found the Hatfields enjoying themselves at the top of the fuming platform. "Well pay you the $10,000," the possemen yelled, "if you will shut off your damn machine!"

Hatfield nodded his head in agreement and carried off his chemicals.

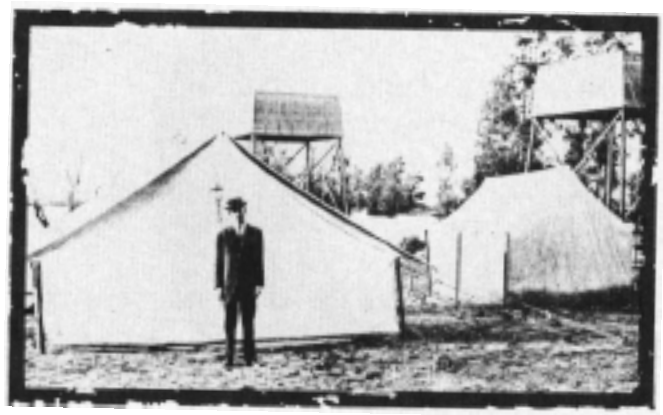
From Harper's Weekly, October 24, 1891.

The rain stopped thirty minutes later.

When Hatfield presented his bill for $10,000 to the council he was rebuffed. The man who made the offer two days ago had no authority to do so. And the deal specifically stated the dam had to be full. It was only half full.

Steaming Hatfield stomped out to the Morean Dam and cooked up a still stronger batch of chemicals.

On January 24, 1917, it began to rain even heavier than before. Rain cascaded out of the mountains in incredible fury collapsing the sides of rivers. The railroad bed between San Diego and Los Angeles was mostly washed away.



Charles M. Hatfield and his rain towers, Memet, Calif., 1912. Courtesy of the San Diego Public Library.

Hoping to save one railroad bridge, officials rolled 12 freight cars atop the span hoping the weight would prevent the bridge from falling. Cars and bridge were washed out to the edge of the sea. Houses vanished from sight as dams burst in the mountains.

On January 26, a posse again set out from San Diego to implore the water wizard to cease. But the heavy waters prevented any encounter. The caretaker informed them that the water level in the dam had risen 18 feet in two days.

The next day the remaining homes in the Tijuana River Valley were floated out to sea. The bloated dead drifted everywhere. On January 27 the Lower Otay Dam broke killing 50 people. The U.S. Marines tried to prevent looting from the shops that lay askew amidst the wrecked towns. Like a witches cauldron, Hatfield continued to feed his chemicals into the pot and the skies continued its avalanche of water.

The water level on January 29 now had reached to within a foot of the lip of Morena Dam. By noon the water ran over the top and Hatfield ceased his incantations. The furnaces were out and by late afternoon the deluge was over. Blue skies appeared and the Hatfields descended from their platform and went to pick up their horses for the ride to town to collect their reward.

The sight that reached their eyes in the lowlands was appalling. "We expected a little flooding but this is ridiculous," Paul Hatfield said. They grew wary Would the citizens take reprisals?

When they saw a crowd armed with farm implements and a few shotguns they became alarmed. (Hatfield always traveled armed.) The crowd invited them to join the posse "to skewer the Hatfields on their pitchforks'. The Hatfields, giving their name as Bensons, declined.

On February 6, Charles Hatfield told reporters that he was not responsible for the damage. "It was up to the city to take precautions to protect the citizenry if they wanted that much water."

The City Council refused to pay the Hatfields. "If we pay we would have to assume liability for all the damage," they said. "Besides," the Council went on, "How can you prove you were responsible for the rain? We will pay the bill if you will assume responsibility for the millions of dollars of lawsuits which were being filed."

Hatfield realized the sticky dilemma and tendered a bill for $1,800 which he said were legitimate expenses for his work. But he never pressed the issue.

Meanwhile, letters poured in to Hatfield from all over the world-Australia, Africa, and many Arabian countries-asking for help. But Hatfield preferred to operate closer to home.

In 1926, while working near Tulare, he offered to fill Roosevelt Lake in Arizona at a rate of $1,000 per billion gallons. His offer was refused.

During the Great Depression, he offered to bring rain to the parched dustbowl area. Admirers urged President Roosevelt to employ his services but he was ignored probably because of pressure from the Weather Bureau who fought and refuted the rainmaker constantly.

How did he do it?

His brother Paul, when asked to explain the secret said, "Only Charles knew. He just stumbled on a formula that someone will discover again someday. After all they are beginning to seed clouds to make min. Did it really work? Well, just remember it hadn't rained for years in San Diego before we came along and it didn't rain again for a few years there after we left."

At one time, Hatfield talked freely, in general terms of his method: he mixed 23 chemicals in casks allowing them to age for a few days and placing them in evaporating pans atop towers. The odor was enough to force one farmer to comment, "the gases smelled so bad that it rains in self defense." He got the idea, he claimed, from noticing that "steam in teakettles would move towards certain chemicals."

In his papers residing in the Denver Public Library are two well-thumbed books: Elements of Meterorology with Questions for Examinations, Designed for Schools and Academies published first in 1848 and again in 1860 by John Brocklesby, and Elementary Meterorology by William Morris Davis, printed in 1394 and again in 1902. Also included in his knapsack were rainfall data for selected California points going as far back as there were records, a barometer, and a rain gauge.

His brother Paul claimed that they had conducted 503 tests without a failure. There were failures, however, it's just that the newspapers never covered them. There were times when the Hatfields were in the process of setting up their towers, it began to rain.

Hatfield died in 1958 but he is not forgotten. Periodically his strange mystical career is rehashed in the press. He was honored in 1973 with a historical marker at Lake Morena, a six-foot red granite column with a plaque inscribed to HATFIELD THE RAINMAKER.

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